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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH EVANGELICAL COUNCIL LEADER

Classified By: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION JOHN CREAMER FOR REASONS 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) The Ambassador met with Evangelical Council (CEV) leader Samuel Olson (dual national AmCit) July 29. Olson told the Ambassador the CEV was beginning to emerge as a public voice, and that plans were underway to institutionalize this development. Olson said that after years of operating under the political radar, Evangelicals felt compelled to speak out because recent GOV legislation threatened their organization. He classified the CEV's recent stand against the National Assembly's move to decriminalize abortion as a success and said it was the first time the CEV had spoken out on a political issue. The council was equally concerned by the proposed Education Law and the Law of Religions; the CEV was reaching out behind the scenes to make its opinion known to the GOV. The Ambassador encouraged the CEV's nascent political activism and offered the Embassy's support on social projects. Olson welcomed Embassy involvement with Evangelical community outreach partners, and provided suggestions for getting a positive U.S. social message out to a broader audience. End summary.

2. (C) Olson told the Ambassador that the Evangelicals had become a stronger public voice over the last few years. He classified the CEV's recent stand against the decriminalization of abortion as the first time the Evangelicals had spoken out on a political issue, and described council opposition to the measure as a confidence-builder for future activity. He said the CEV had distributed a document outlining its opposition to decriminalization to political deputies, and had hosted a conference at which two MVR deputies spoke. Olson told the Ambassador that the council had decided to decentralize its control over organization communications to encourage future involvement, and was creating regional alliance chapters to speak out on local issues. Olson said that 22 local alliance chapters currently existed in the country, and estimated that this number would increase to approximately 40 chapters by the year's end.

3. (C) Olson said Chavez's message of anti-corruption and concern for the poor resonated deeply with Evangelicals. Many still believed in the "dream", even as reality about Chavez set in. He noted that the poor were learning how to access the GOV's largesse in the barrios to help themselves temporarily, even if Chavez's economics would not flatten social inequity over the long-term. An Evangelical community activist had recently been given a large warehouse to build an indigent center by the Mayor of Caracas Freddy Bernal. He said that many Evangelicals were becoming more indebted to the new system, despite emerging doubts about Chavez's long-term goals.

4. (C) Olson said past political failures, including a failed political party, made many Evangelicals wary of taking on a larger political role. Evangelicals who reached out to the GOV as intermediaries lacked a strong Evangelical support base and could not credibly claim to speak on behalf of the community. Still, he noted a shift in the community's willingness to let organization leaders speak out on political issues. He also noted that the potential adverse impact of GOV legislation on education and religion on Evangelical institutions was spurring greater Evangelical political activism.

5. (C) Olson told the Ambassador the Education Law would do away with theological education in the country by prohibiting the existence of educational institutions. According to Olson, this law would impact the Catholic church as well because it eliminated seminaries. He said the Education Law would also do away with a Ministry of Education agreement which allows volunteers to teach Christian values in schools. Olson said the CEV was heavily invested in this program and had approximately 4,000 volunteers trained to participate. Olson told the Ambassador that the immediate fallout from the Law of Religions was not as serious, but noted that it could be used to create a council of religions such as exists in Cuba.

16. (C) Olson outlined a behind the scenes communications

strategy for approaching GOV leaders on legislation. He said the CEV wanted to stay out of the public eye as much as possible so as to appear "unthreatening." The council would try to reach out to the GOV as much as possible behind closed doors. The Ambassador emphasized the importance of religious institutions as a counterbalance to the GOV, and encouraged the CEV's nascent political initiative. He offered Embassy support for Evangelical social projects.

17. (C) Olson welcomed Embassy support for community outreach projects run by Evangelical partners, and offered suggestions for getting a positive U.S. social message out to a broader audience. Olson classified the U.S. message highlighting support for social projects as "strong and meaningful." However, he listed the public's suspicion of underlying U.S. motives as well as the difficulty of reaching the bulk of the population which relies on word of mouth for information as two obstacles to conveying this message. Olson suggested bigger, more impactful projects and Ambassadorial surprise visits to community outreaches as two potential means of overcoming these obstacles.

COMMENT

18. (C) The CEV's willingness to play a more political role is a positive step. Still, the organization's overall impact as an opposition voice will be limited by its desire to keep a low profile and its inherent vulnerability to GOV pressure. The council is fragmented by competing internal groups and lacks a strong international support system. Still, the Evangelicals represent a sizable, growing percentage of the Venezuelan population and their emerging political involvement should be encouraged. Post will continue to reach out and foster Evangelical initiatives in the political sphere.

19. (C) AMBASSADOR'S COMMENT. Right now, the Catholic Church and the Evangelical movement are probably the only two institutions capable of challenging Chavez in his political base of the poor. The Catholic Church has less credibility, but is better organized. The Evangelicals are growing in the poor neighborhoods, but are less organized and uncertain about their political role. Both are key institutions. We have to work with them if we want to penetrate Chavez' political support base.
Brownfield

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